Healthcare Leadership with Political Astuteness and its role in the implementation of major system change: the HeLPA qualitative study

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Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.

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Plain English summary

The HeLPA qualitative study

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Plain English summary

Making change in health and care services is often complicated. There is growing awareness that change processes are difficult because people have different preferences and agendas about the nature of change. These diverse and competing agendas underlie what is sometimes called the 'micropolitics' or small 'p' politics of the health service. The ability to recognise and deal with these differences requires a distinct set of skills and abilities that are called 'political skill' or 'political astuteness'.

This study aimed to understand how political astuteness can help to manage the competing preferences and agendas that complicate health services change, especially when trying to implement large-scale or major change in regional health and care systems. By completing this research, the study planned to produce new learning materials and resources to support future service leaders to develop and use these skills.

The study involved four activities. The first involved a review of the existing evidence on the use of 'political skill' and 'political astuteness' in leading change. This helped to clarify the research focus and identify gaps in the literature. The second involved carrying out interviews with health and care leaders to understand their views and experiences about the politics of change, and how they have used or observed others using political skills and behaviours when implementing change. The third involved in-depth research with three examples of regional major system change to understand how these skills and behaviours were used in real time. The fourth involved working with various stakeholder groups to review the study findings and produce a set of learning resources and materials to help future health service leaders develop their own political skills.

The study found that a particular view of 'political skill' has come to dominate academic thinking, and that this is becoming more common in health services research. However, it also showed that this view can emphasise highly individualised psychological qualities while potentially neglecting more relational and situated qualities. For this reason, the study recommends taking a broad view of political skills, strategies and actions. The interview study with health and care leaders elaborated the different types of skills, strategies and actions used to understand and address the politics of change, leading to a new framework that has more direct relevance to health and care services. This framework was then used to analyse the experiences of implementing major system change in three NHS regions, leading to a more developed understanding of the contingencies and collective processes of implementing change. Finally, these findings were used to co-design a set of learning resources that were piloted and tested with different groups, with the intention of making them available to other leadership development programmes.

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